

Turning 21—A Rite of Passage

Twenty Percent of Navy's alcohol incidents involve Sailors aged 20-22;

One third of all DUI/DWI incidents involve Sailors who have turned 21 but not yet turned 22.

For most underage Sailors, turning 21 is the last major rite of passage of their young lives. It is important to understand that this will be the case even for nondrinkers. Most major social venues will not permit underage individuals entry. Many enforce an early curfew. This situation cordons off access to a major portion of any city, regardless of the drinking habits of the Sailor. Thus, even nondrinkers are likely to celebrate their 21st birthdays as a seminal event. Many nondrinkers will choose to celebrate this day by drinking to excess.

Given the disproportionate number of incidents caused by Sailors within a year of the 21st birthday, mentoring and counseling as that date approaches is vital to any prevention program. Each command should know the dates when their Sailors turn 21 and incorporate such counseling into its prevention program. Effective counseling should incorporate the following topics:

Choice:

Many young Sailors protest that they are treated like children. Sailors must understand that the decision to drink, or drink to excess, is ultimately theirs. Yet it is important to emphasize that they will be held accountable for the consequences of their choices. Mentors need not resort to scare tactics to get this point across. A brief discussion of Navy's and your command's policy on alcohol abuse will suffice. Above all, the Sailor should have the necessary information to make a harm-risk analysis before drinking. Many will choose to drink excessively. They need to know that they will be held accountable for their choices. Ultimately, Sailors who choose to drink to excess will do so regardless of our best efforts. The best we can do is ensure that they make an informed choice and enforce Navy policy if they incur an incident. Some Sailors will only learn to moderate or abstain from drinking through experience.

Support:

Knowing that many Sailors will choose to drink, commands should seek to minimize the possible consequences of excessive drinking. Aggressive Designated Driver programs and allowing Sailors to call their Chief, LPO, or Division Office without fear of punitive action when they have been drinking will reduce the likelihood of DUIs and other incidents. Letting a Sailor know that this support system is in place may actually deter some from drinking heavily, but at the very least it lets Sailors know that the command is looking out for their welfare.

Relevance:

Sailors should know that the concern with their drinking behavior is not simply another attempt by an authority figure to control their lives. Let Sailors know that they play an important role in mission accomplishment and that you cannot afford to lose a single Sailor because of an alcohol incident. While this seems self-evident, the concern for the Sailor's well-being and his/her contribution to the command's mission often get lost in the prevention and/or disciplinary process.

Key points to consider:

-Your Sailors are adults. Talking to them at that level means stressing that drinking is their choice, but that they will be held to account for their actions.

-Sailors want to know that they're important to the mission. They should know that you're not trying to control their lives but that you're trying to ensure their safety.

-The command needs to be consistent in its alcohol policy. If the Sailor sees some people get away with incidents and others busted, he/she will probably ignore your counsel.

-Sailors need to know that being a shipmate doesn't end at the pier. Stress the need for them to look after each other. If the Sailor does decide to drink, it's better that he/she do so around shipmates than alone. Liberty is a chance for young Sailors to learn to act responsibly by policing each other.

-Don't use gimmicks. Your Sailors know that you're older than they are, so don't try to act their age to get your point across. Let them know that you're responsible for their safety, and that you want them to have a good time in a safe way. Honesty is the best policy to follow; they'll see through you if you put on any airs.

The goal of any prevention program targeting young Sailors cannot simply be an end to alcohol incidents. By emphasizing choice and responsibility, mentorship will help develop Sailors who will make the right decisions on their own. As they advance in rank, they will in turn mentor those junior to them.

KNOW WHEN YOUR SAILORS TURN 21!